



UNDER THE SUN

Austrian painter **Philip Mueller** explains how history, the Italian coast and Richard Wagner play a part in his contemporary, surrealist-tinged take on classical portraiture

I have gone to Capri and Sorrento annually for several years now, reading about Emperor Tiberio, who spent his last years there feasting and partying, or Odysseus and the Sirens. I stayed in a Saracen tower from 1512—when the pirates took over the area—just to hear the Siren songs that trapped and killed so many sailors. There are explanations—the sound happens around 15 August because of the underwater volcanoes releasing hot air—but I wanted to hear them, and I thought I did, swimming two kilometres into the sea until a boat brought me back. So many of these myths have not changed for the last 2,600 years. Palermo is similar—the eruption of Vesuvius was hell on earth, but somehow the preserved bodies still feel alive. It is one place where you can imagine how life was back then, and to me, it seems close to life now: a decadent society wanting to be healthy.

Old sculptures strongly influence me. For instance, El Greco, who also spent a lot of time at the tip of Italy's shoe. He was the worst you could imagine—a really, really bad guy—but this is the best place for “bad guys.” My paintings are about social hierarchies and the status quo, and the progression from my *Black Flamingos, Capri* to *Mutters* series follows an anti-hero motorcycle gang wearing masks and riding horses, hating and eating swans, acting as false idols in a self-created world of freedom, excess, deconstruction and Michelangelo.

At first I—or they—painted these protagonists' portraits on surfboards—the symbol of freedom—but now these bad guys are painted in a more classical medium and style without masks. In Italy, and my painting, there is this contrast. The amazing beauty of Neapolitan churches with Titians hanging inside are some of the most beautiful spaces from antiquity I have ever seen, but they are limited by the Mafia, who don't care about cultural institutions. This concept and



mass of anti-beauty impresses me.

I interrupt my paintings with surreal elements—ghosts, bugs, aloe vera plants. They stand in for my person. Self-portraits. I unmasked *The Black Flamingos*, but I am still wearing my own mask to hide the problem within the perfect situations I am trying to provoke in the paintings, because I am always painting the ideal. That is why I paint. It is very difficult to recreate these scenarios in real life, so it becomes like dreaming, seeing and wishing myself into these situations of honesty and innocence. Naples is like this—I visited 10 years ago because of Hermann Nitsch—there you are on streets that have been walked on since they were built 2000 years ago. This energy, and the thoughts had there by all those people, are still there. I fell in love with its purity, no matter how it was achieved.

I wanted to capture this, and found Richard Wagner's *Symphony in C Major*,

an early piece that still showed influences from Bach. In that Saracen tower, always with a bottle or two, I listened to the piece every sunset, and the combination was perfection—a beauty you cannot imagine. Then a visiting classical musician from Vienna told me, “You know, Wagner wrote this when he spent time in Capri,” and in that moment I realised it was perfection, I just hadn't known it. Wagner sat where I sat, watched the same sunset, lived the same pure life, and wrote this symphony, which found me as I searched for the city's musical match.

It isn't necessary to bring history into painting in general; in a way it is just me. I make what I see and what moves me—but if you look at the classical art, painting is the purest and most direct way to impress the status quo. You can take a photograph, but you can't put the journey through your brain with all those thoughts, histories and processes into a photo. But you can see them in Capri, a place with so many stories. ■ carbon12dubai.com

Above: Philip Mueller.
Inset: *Mutter Alexander*, 2017. Oil on canvas. 55x45cm.